

Centuries-Old Spanish Customs Still Prevail in New Mexico Cities

By HARVEY W. PATTON

FOR more than three centuries, or ever since the Spaniards invaded the southwestern section of what is now part of the United States, the devout people of this region of America have been holding religious fiestas. Each community has its patron saint, and it is in honor of these saints that the fiestas are held. As different sections of the Western Hemisphere, which were settled by Spaniards, have different patron saints it means that just that many fiestas are held each year—a fiesta for each patron saint, or each community or parish.

These fiestas, or celebrations, have been carried down through the ages until today—wherever the ancient Spanish customs prevail. And these customs prevail right here in one of the United States, New Mexico, where about 75 per cent of the population claims to be Spanish-American.

The writer had heard more or less of these primitive celebrations, and was in New Mexico when the fiesta of San Felipe (St. Philip) was to be held at Old Town, that state, so he went there to get a first-hand view.

First, let us locate Old Town and tell something of its history. It was originally settled by the Spaniards when they came up from Old Mexico and followed the Rio Grande Valley. New Mexico historians say that was 335 years ago. They built a little church at the place, and dedicated it to San Felipe de Neri, who is known to history as the apostle of Rome, who died May 27, 1595. The town was called Albuquerque, in honor of the Spanish duke of Albuquerque. Forty years ago, when the first railroad was built through New Mexico, a new and modern city sprang up along the railroad, and it took the name of Albuquerque. But the old town, two miles west, still remained, and it became known as Old Town, or Old Albuquerque, and it remains today in the same primitive state that the original Spaniards in America left it.

It is just a step from a city of modern buildings, paved streets and street cars, but it seems, from appearances, like a journey back to the Middle Ages. Except for a few brick buildings and a stone courthouse, for the county seat of Bernalillo County is Old Town, everything is one-story adobe. The streets are narrow and crooked, but the Spaniards did not overlook their old custom, for there is a plaza in the very center of the town, and the ancient church of San Felipe occupies the most conspicuous site on the side of the plaza.

It is the custom of the Catholic Church to honor the memories of its saints on the anniversaries of their death, not their birth, and the fiesta of San Felipe at Old Town was such an event this year, as it has been for some hundreds of years. May 27 actually was the anniversary of San Felipe's death, but this fell on a week day, and there wasn't much with which the church had to do. However, there were dances that night; also the following night, Saturday, and vespers were held in the church that evening.

On Sunday, May 29, the real celebration began, and all the folk of New Town, as well as those from many miles around, wended their way to Old Town either to join in the festivities or to merely look on. And the strangest part of all seemed to be the total absence of the English language. Everything seemed foreign—the people, the buildings and the garb of many of the spectators or participants, except those from New Town, or more modernly speaking—New Albuquerque. The tongue heard everywhere was Spanish. But one couldn't forget that he was in the good old U. S. A., for the colors of our country predominated. Everywhere the Stars and Stripes floated, and the plaza was nearly buried under red, white and blue bunting.

"All this may cause you to think you are in Old Mexico or Spain," said a gray-haired Spanish-American in broken English, but those colors ought to remind you that in spite of the religious fervor of the simple people of New Mexico, they never forget that they owe allegiance to the flag—the Stars and Stripes—and that is why you see the colors everywhere out here today."

The celebration Sunday morning, May 29, opened with solemn high mass in the old church, followed by a sermon in Spanish by the Rev. Fr. Firmin Ibar-

recheven, one of the most noted Spanish pulpit orators of the Southwest. The little church could not accommodate one-tenth of the crowd who clamored for admittance.

In the afternoon the open air festivities were held, and the plaza and narrow streets leading thereto were literally jammed with people hours before they were scheduled to start.

The exercises began with the booming of cannon, quickly followed by the blare of a brass band. Necks were craned toward the tiny street from which the music emanated, and the band swung into view.

The musicians were Indians! But they weren't clad in native costume. Not much! They wore neat blue uniforms, and the leader would have done credit to a Sousa—in dignity at least. But they were Indians nevertheless. They came from the government Indian school near Albuquerque.

Next came a troop of New Mexico state cavalry, mounted on beautiful big blacks. Of course, the colors of the United States, with the color guard, were out in front.

Next in line were the various church societies of Old Town, New Town and various other communities in that section. Then came the priests and acolytes, with solemn tread, bearing silken banners, crosses and a statue of San Felipe.

Following the parade and benediction, there were all sorts of games and contests for the children, with music by a "white" band, which was stationed in the center of the plaza.

In spite of the sacredness of the fiesta, there was a raucous note—odds of them in fact—from all sections of the plaza, for there were concessions, from which all manner of things were sold, from "hot dogs" to near beer. The discordant shouts of the vendors seemed to jar on the solemnity of the occasion.

The fiesta closed with fireworks, set off from the roof of an adobe building perhaps 200 years old. And then everybody went home, happy in the belief that he had done his duty to his church and to his country.

The San Felipe fiesta is but a replica of the other saint's day celebrations that are held throughout New Mexico.

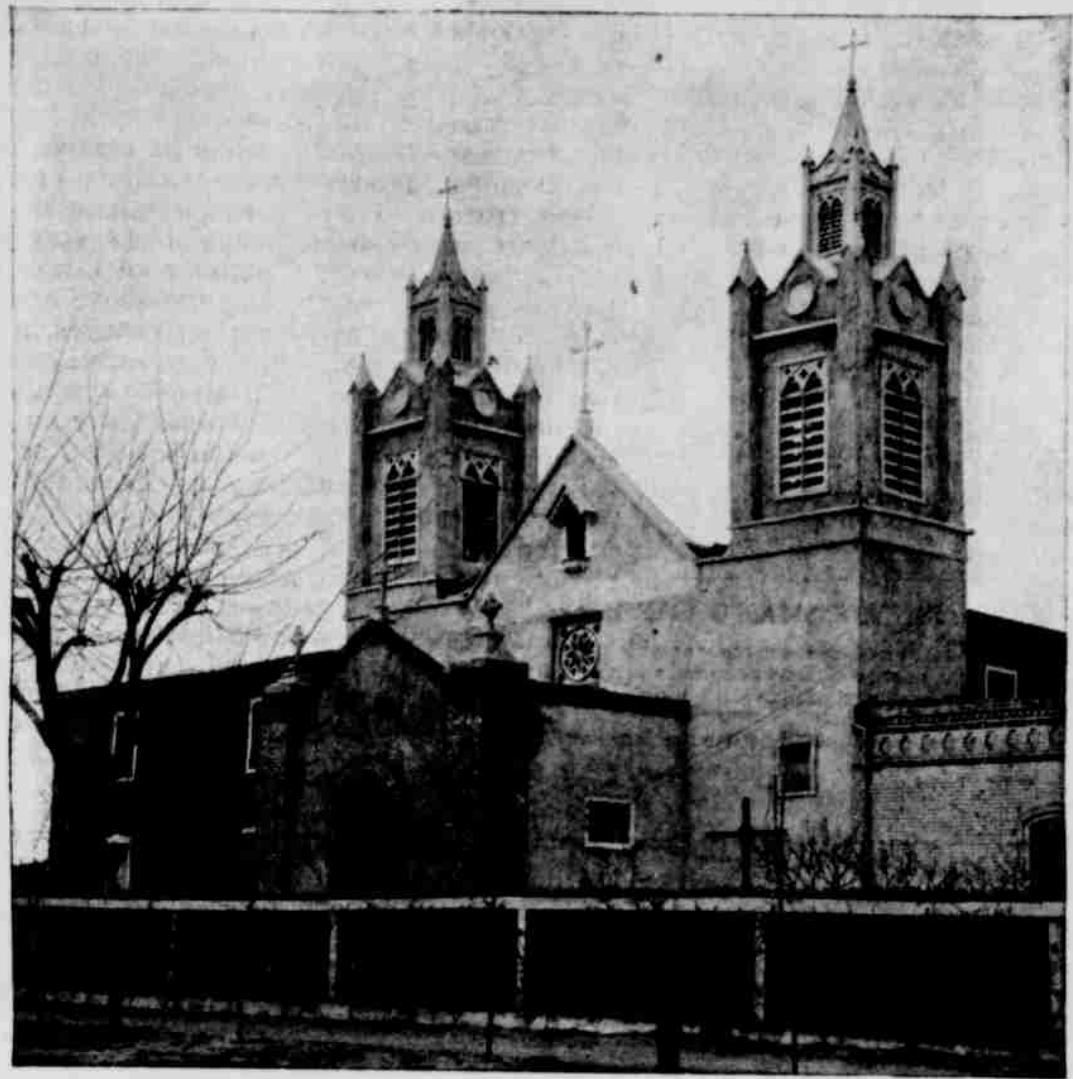
Non-members of the Catholic faith often refer to such fiestas as idol worship and sometimes even say harsher things about them, but when one understands the full significance of them it seems clear why they

are held, especially in the sections of America that were first settled by foreigners. The natives of these sections have believed in ceremony all their lives. It has been handed down to them for many generations and a saint's fiesta is one big day in a year for them. The picturesque appeals to them, therefore the fiesta will live on. When one says that, it virtually means a *diverting* Christianity to those folk.

The Rev. Fr. D. P. Lawton, pastor of San Felipe Church, Old Town, is authority for this statement. Fr. Lawton, in a statement, did not use the word "advertising," but he says the pageant held in that place May 29 was to stimulate Christianity, the same as the flag of our country stimulates patriotism. Fr. Lawton is not a Spanish-American, but he has lived among them and knows their customs and ideals.

"Not a few of the thousands who view the religious fiestas in New Mexico each year look upon them in the light of a theatrical spectacle, strongly tinged with superstition," said Fr. Lawton. "This view is quite natural in itself, when one doesn't understand the significance of Christian feasts and their origin."

"Man is differentiated from all other created beings by the possession of an immortal, spiritual soul joined to a material perishable body. Through the senses of his body the soul looks out upon, and comes in con-



Church of San Felipe, Old Town, N. M., erected by the Spaniards about 300 years ago.

tact with the world around it, and through the same avenues the images of outward objects enter the soul, stamp their impression upon it, and excite its deepest emotions by means of the imagination.

"The powerful influence of the imagination on the actions, and even on the judgments of man, is recognized by all. The close relationship between the senses and the imagination also is known.

"This knowledge has been used in all ages as a factor of influence in swaying the minds and the hearts of men. A familiar fact will serve to illustrate this. A national flag is but a bit of bunting of seemingly fantastic pattern, but its beholders see in it the embodiment of the genius and the aspirations of an entire people; a national song is but so many air vibrations; yet, falling on the ear of the soldier on the battlefield it animates him to the highest pitch of enthusiasm and heroic valor.

"Since such is human nature, and since mere material things are capable of becoming factors of influence for the achievement of the mightiest results, it is not strange that the Christian religion, whose aim is to direct heavenward all the energies of her children, should be found utilizing these powerful auxiliaries.

"With her children's highest interests at heart, she does her utmost to engage these common instincts of their nature; she presses into her service all that is beautiful in nature and uplifting in art to aid her in the accomplishment of her beneficent purpose. She realizes that to fulfill her divine mission she must not merely present to mankind a satisfactory solution of the perplexing problems which his reason presents to him, but she must also, by the fitness and splendor of her worship, captivate his senses and imagination, and thus lead him to consecrate his whole being to God.

"In acquiring a notion of the invisible, man has generally made use of the imagination, which, while it often misrepresents, serves to concretize and make real the thing he recognizes but only vaguely grasps. For this reason the Christian religion has allowed the use of statues and paintings to represent Christ, His saints and His angels, because these images are a legitimate aid to devotion since the honor that is given them is but relative, being directed through them to the beings they represent. It is similar to the honor we pay to the flag of our country.

"The emotional element that enters into external worship is common to all religions. It finds expression in sacred music, processions and stately ceremonies.

"Therefore the ceremonies at Old Town this year and in former years were far from empty pageants. They were legitimate expressions of religious feeling."

From the foregoing it will be seen the fiesta of Old Town and other fiestas in the Southwest are appeals to the imagination. Advertising is supposed to appeal to the imagination. Therefore the fiestas are to advertise Christianity.

And these "advertisements" in the form of fiestas, pay big dividends in the form of religious devotion. The natives have so long been accustomed to the affairs that they are now taken as a part of their religion, and it would never do to abandon them. This is not an intimation that the fiestas are necessary to keep the religious spirit alive in the people, for they are most devoted to the church, but the celebrations are part of their lives and they form the means of expressing their religious fervor.

As indication of the strength of the devotion of these people to their church, Holy Week may be cited as an example. In the small towns absolutely no business is transacted on Good Friday, even the banks being closed. And in the cities the Catholic churches are thronged with worshippers all that day. Easter Sunday is, of course, the day of days for the natives.



Spanish-American girls, members of the Children of Mary Society in the religious pageant at Old Town, N. M., May 29.